PROMISING PRACTICES IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

California Community College Collaborative (C4)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Community colleges and their faculty and administrators are used to critiques of their missions and complaints about their outcomes. Since the early 1900s, two-year colleges and community colleges have been berated by policymakers, scholars, and others for focusing too much on practical skills rather than rigorous academic preparation; for watering down their academic curriculum; for allowing themselves to be subject to the whims of business and industry; for failing to transfer more than one-quarter of entering students who state an intention to transfer; for perpetuating gaps between the haves and the have-nots; and for many other offenses (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Dougherty, 1994; Frye, 1994; Grubb, 1999; Levin, 2001; McGrath & Spear, 1991; Meier, 2004; Pincus, 1994; Shaw, Rhoads, & Valadez, 1999; Valadez, 1996; Weis, 1985). Recent reports by research groups have followed suit, and in the first decade of the 21st century community colleges continue to be the subject of unfavorable scrutiny (e.g., Shulock & Moore, 2007).

While examining community college outcomes and demanding better performance are no doubt a noble endeavor, such reports and scholarly inquiries are frequently greeted by community college faculty and administrators with one of two common refrains: (1) that research reports provide general findings that are not relevant to individual campuses or (2) that researchers have little understanding of community college students, who include those who are part-time attenders of college, part-time and full-time workers, low income individuals, and academically underprepared students. As a result, these critiques—which make up a significant portion of all published material pertaining to community colleges—have limited impact on actual practice in community colleges.

Furthermore, these reports ignore what particular community college campuses may be doing well, often ignoring the context in which community college education takes place (e.g., low per-student funding, open-door policies, students with an extremely wide range of goals and abilities, a large workforce of part-time faculty). While critiques and outcomes reports have their place, it seems to us that to make substantial improvements to community college outcomes, we need to identify and examine programs and practices currently taking place on community college campuses that have demonstrated positive results in raising student achievement. Furthermore, we need to share this information with other colleges and discuss specific ways that these promising practices may be transferred to and institutionalized on other campuses.

There is, of course, an abundance of “best practice” studies; discipline-specific journals are full of them, as are publications such as New Directions for Community Colleges that are written for community college scholars and practitioners. Nonetheless, the vast majority of these best practice publications focus on the features of a particular program; few discuss if and how the practices and processes that have made the program successful may be transferred to another college, which may differ dramatically in student population,
political context, and institutional history (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Levin, 2007).

Across California, community colleges are creating and redesigning instructional programs in order to improve student learning and close the achievement gap between Latino, African American, Native American, and low-income students and their white, Asian, or more affluent peers. These programs exist in all areas of the community college—including transfer education, workforce preparation, basic skills training, English as a Second Language, and community education—and have the potential to improve the quality of student learning at community colleges.

In spite of these promising programmatic developments, there is little sharing among community colleges in California of those practices, with few notable exceptions (see Alssid et al., 2002; California Community Colleges, 2007). Thus, there is a crucial need to identify and examine these promising programs, as well as the practices that ensure their success, and to share this information with other colleges throughout the state. The sharing of promising practices must take into account institutional context and history, and must explore if and how the practices and processes that have made the program successful may be transferred to another college, which may differ dramatically in student population, social context, and institutional history.

Project Summary

Transferring Promising Practices is a two part project. The first part involved a field investigation of community college programs that demonstrated promise to close the achievement/opportunity gap in student outcomes. The purpose of this investigation was to reveal which behaviors and characteristics of these programs constituted promising and effective practice. The second part of this project involved identifying ways in which these effective principles of practice could be transferred to other community colleges. We found in five California community colleges programs practices that were noteworthy of emulation. The programs included: English as a Second Language Program (City College of San Francisco); Basic Skills Transformation (Chaffey College); Adelante Program and Latino Center (Santa Monica College); Accelerated Careers in Technology—ACT—Program (Modesto Junior College); Fashion Program (Los Angeles Trade-Technical College).

After the identification of programs to investigate (including one other program not listed above①) we began with a review of the literature, first in subject relevant areas: Basic Skills, English as a Second Language, Counseling, Transfer, including Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Transfer Education, and Vocational Education. As well, we reviewed literature on practice, promising practice, and the transfer of practice, particularly related to educational settings. We then developed analytical frameworks prior to data collection and refined these frameworks subsequent to data collection so that our collected data could be analyzed systematically and coherently.

① In our reporting of outcomes, we deleted those for Foothill/De Anza Colleges for various reasons. Principally, the goals and the functioning of this program made it incomparable to other promising practices that we encountered in the other five programs.
We used a purposeful sampling method in order to select six promising community college instructional programs to participate in our case studies. Beginning in October 2007 we initiated our field research investigation using in-depth qualitative case study analyses of our promising programs. Following case study methodology (Eisenhardt, 1989; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 1994), data collection consisted primarily of one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with faculty, staff, and students involved in the six instructional programs, focus groups (primarily with students), participant observation, and document analysis. Relevant faculty, administrators, students, and staff were identified through partnership documents, as well as via a snowballing technique (Merriam, 1998; Mason, 2002) in which each interviewee or focus group participant referred us to other appropriate participants.

After fieldwork was completed all of the data were transcribed and coding and analysis completed with the software program Atlas ti. Data were coded initially around themes that scholarly literature has identified as a best practice. Ultimately, we coded data using the three dimensions of organizational effectiveness: ecological, historical-cultural, and organizational. Data analysis was within site not an across site operation. That is, coding and analysis were specific to each program. Across site analysis arose in the final phase in order to identify transferable properties and practices that were not program-specific.

This project discovered four main attributes of programs of promise that we refer to as the Four Cs:

1. **Cohesion**- refers to program elements’ (faculty and staff, students, and curriculum and instruction) ability to operate as a unit where behaviors and actions mesh or are rationally consistent;

2. **Cooperation**- refers to the degree to which program personnel work together toward common goals and the relationships between faculty and students as well as faculty and administrators are respectful and supportive;

3. **Connection**- refers to the program and its personnel’s capacity to develop and maintain linkages and relationships both within the institution and to external parties, so that interdependence is both recognized and relied upon to advance the interests of the program;

4. **Consistency**- refers to the presence of a distinctive and stable pattern of program behaviors that promote regular interaction and collective events.

As well, we learned that several principles guided these practices. These principles included (a) attention to and focus upon student learning and student development, (b) commitment to the program among the participants, (c) strong work ethic, and (d) nonhierarchical and shared leadership.

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2 We define a “promising” instructional program as one that has demonstrably improved student learning and has closed the achievement gap, as measured by course pass rates, certificate or degree attainment rates, and so forth. c
These principles were enacted by either a group of faculty in the instructional areas or by administrators, counselors and support staff in the student support areas.

Recommendations

We note throughout this report that institutional context is a significant component in the behaviors and actions of organizational participants. Our recommendations, then, must be translated to fit a specific college’s context—its history, organizational functioning including existing norms, personnel, students, and community. The following recommendations are for the purpose of guidance and arose out of this project.

• The needs of a diverse student population need to be considered when developing curriculum and instruction and constructing student support services. It is not sufficient to have a “one size-fits-all” approach. Recognition of student development in both the realms of social and cognitive development for various populations (e.g., adult learners, ethnic groups) is a requisite and the use of practices tied to student development theory is imperative.

• Institutional commitment among college members requires a sense of belonging and ownership. Work can be valued for both its intrinsic as well as extrinsic components. Institutional leaders are charged with developing a supportive environment for college members. The shared nature of the enterprise (of its goals and actions) if absent, must be developed. As well, organizational members must know that their work is meaningful—that it counts and has consequences.

• To improve student outcomes, including course and program completion, job acquisition, and transfer to a university, college members must devote considerable effort and time to their work and to students in particular. The gap between what is and what is expected is considerable and it cannot be closed by magic; instead, both effort and efficiencies (e.g., coordination) of labor are necessary in order to make progress.

• Leadership that emphasizes hierarchy and authority will not suffice to move an organization forward effectively. Instead, leadership in effective programs has evolved over time and is more shared than located centrally. Colleges are encouraged to provide mechanisms (e.g., develop leadership programs) to build leadership within and across the institution.

• Decision-making that will have positive effects upon student development and educational outcomes necessitates considerable participation by those organizational members involved with student development and education. Less-hierarchical authority structures are correlated with programs identified with promising practices. Colleges are encouraged to devolve responsibility and
authority to those at the program level for decisions about students including student learning and student development.

Specific recommendations for each instructional program examined are outlined in the section **Transferring these Effective Program Practices- A Guide**

Detailed descriptions about each promising program, as well as the context in which it is found, are also included in the full report.

For more information about the Transferring Promising Practices study or the California Community College Collaborative please visit [www.c4.ucr.edu](http://www.c4.ucr.edu).
Transferring these Effective Program Practices- A Guide

Basic Skills

- We recommend the development and establishment of Learning Centers on campuses of community colleges that focus upon all learning skills for community college students. These centers should be central to instructional practices of all programs and serve all students in all programs. They will also house Basic Skills programming.
- We recommend organizing all components of the Learning Centers under the same formal administrative leadership but ensure that faculty have the authority, responsibility, and resources to operate the Learning Centers including the basic skills program and its curriculum.
- We recommend that all students be required to use the Learning Centers.
- We recommend that faculty hired for or assigned to the Learning Centers be committed to students and their development.

Career Education

- We recommend an internship program whereby students spend considerable time working in a related business and where students either receive pay or college credit. In order to manage this program, there needs to be a program internship coordinator, a faculty member with industry experience and contacts with the relevant industry.
- We recommend the development and maintenance of close program ties to local business and industry and frequent interactions, both formally and informally.
- We recommend the hiring of faculty with industry experience and close ties to the businesses relevant to the program.
- We recommend program control and considerable autonomy over student program admissions and course registration, which would include the establishment of a coordinator/advisor position to oversee student advisement and registration.
- We recommend instructional practices that challenge students, such as project competitions, that also bring the industry to campus to participate in these practices.
- We recommend a curriculum that is industry relevant and current and that draws upon the advice of industry experts.
- We recommend the development of a strong program culture which includes support among faculty, students, and staff. This culture is built upon commitments of program personnel to student development and attainment and close working relationships among program personnel. The ethos to be developed is one of hard work both by faculty, staff, and students.
English as a Second Language

- We recommend the use of the same “homegrown” or locally developed assessment instrument for both the ESL credit and noncredit students to place incoming students and then mandatory placement of students by level of English language proficiency. The test should include multiple choice questions, a short interview, and a writing sample, supplemented with an oral interview, so that it measures the overall language skills of the individual learner.
- We recommend institutional support and professional development for both credit and noncredit faculty as well as full-time and part-time faculty through a Teaching Center.
- We recommend a substantial component of full-time faculty for ESL programs, including in the noncredit area.
- We recommend the offering of similar benefits to the part-time faculty such as comparable pay and health benefits, the use of institutional resources, and opportunities for training and professional development.
- We recommend the hiring of faculty who are a good fit both with existing faculty and with program directors.
- We recommend the centralized administration of the ESL program or programs.
- We recommend that both full-time and part-time faculty become involved in institutional governance both at the departmental and college levels.
- We recommend the holding of regular meetings of faculty and administrators to discuss program actions and planning.
- We recommend both numerous and various support services for students, including those which provide learning assistance and those which provide personal, social, and career support, as well as those that connect students and faculty in both credit and noncredit programs.

Vocational

- We recommend structuring curriculum in a way that requires students to mimic a work schedule (6–8 hours a day, 5 days a week).
- We recommend admitting students in groups and keep those students together throughout the duration of their coursework (i.e., cohort model).
- We recommend establishing relationships with external business and industry bodies to identify community needs, sources for funding, and potential employers.
- We recommend solidifying connections with external agencies by organizing those interactions into scheduled committee meetings and advising sessions.
- We recommend incorporating external agencies into college policy making and other processes (e.g., the admissions process).
- We recommend planning events (e.g., graduation ceremonies) to connect students with potential employers to quicken the hiring process.
• We recommend hiring faculty who exhibit commitment to students and the surrounding community. Hire faculty with industry experience (and therefore industry contacts).

• We recommend connecting faculty to public schools that feed into the college to create and streamline vocational education programs in middle and high schools that align with the college programs (and therefore the needs of the community).

Transfer

• We recommend connecting student services, particularly counseling and advising, to specific programs so that student support is tailored to the needs of specific student populations.

• We recommend ensuring that faculty and counselors are knowledgeable about specific program student characteristics and needs.

• We recommend ensuring that there are structures in place to develop and maintain networks for students across campus, to four-year colleges and universities, and to community agencies.

• We recommend developing curricula that are sensitive and attractive to student populations; that is, connect components of curricula such as readings and assignments to the backgrounds of students so that there is lack of foreignness to college work.

• We recommend developing and maintaining high expectations and high interest levels for transfer of students to four-year colleges and universities both among student services personnel and faculty. We refer to this as “warming up” students.

• We recommend ensuring administrative support for both counseling services and transfer programs that respond to specific student populations.

• We recommend providing professional development opportunities for faculty and student support personnel so that they gain knowledge of student populations, pedagogy, and counseling interventions for students.

• We recommend providing opportunities and avenues for students to interact informally with each other, with faculty, and with counselors and to participate both on and off-campus in academically oriented activities.

• We recommend ensuring that students register, and can register, for classes that are transfer program requirements.